



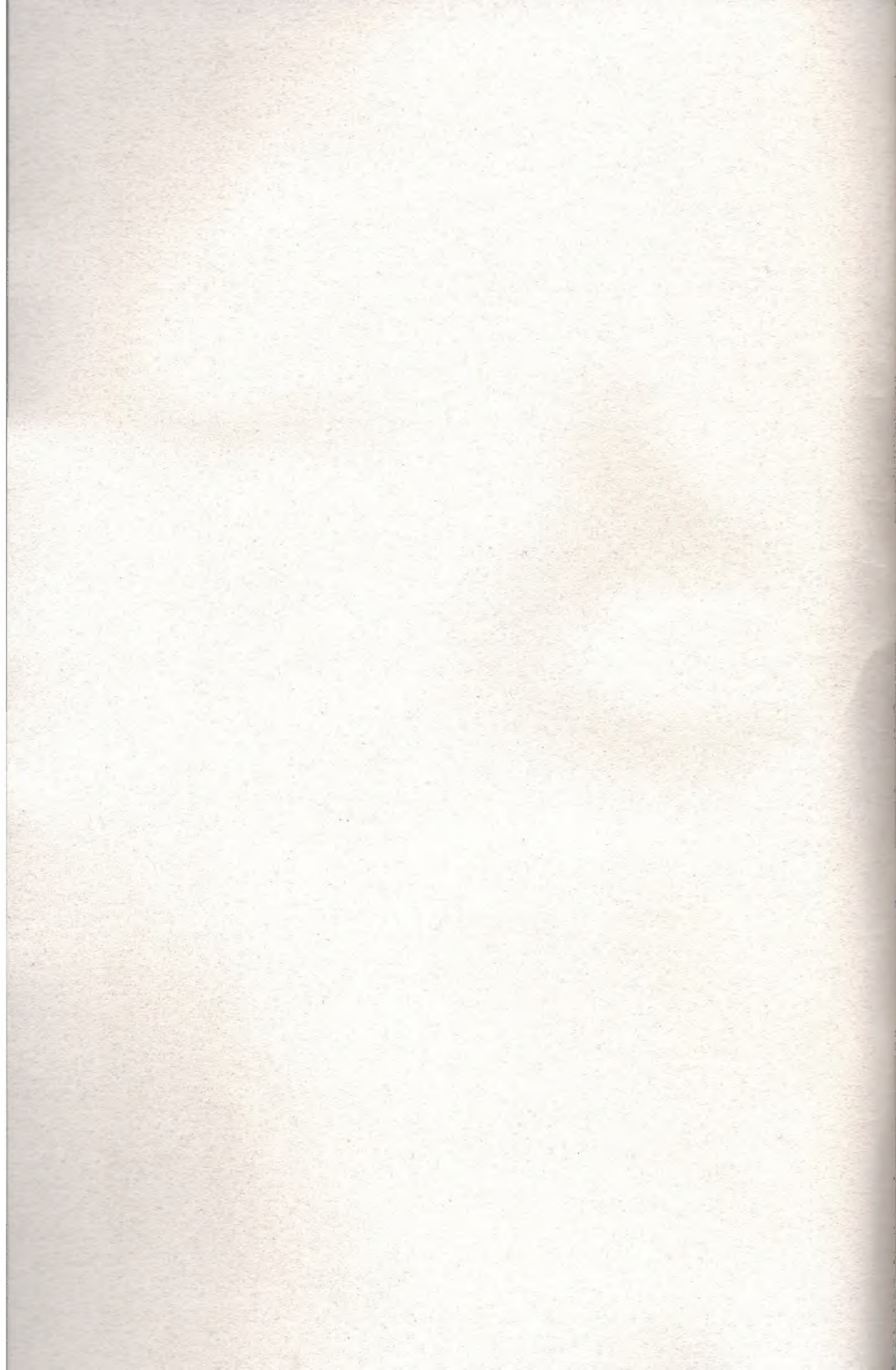
# Grave Secrets

*a Forever Knight novella*

written by  
Susan M. Garrett









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Sometimes when you write a story, you're not quite certain what's going to happen, or what it's really about. I had promised Rosemary that I would write another novella-length story that could be sold by the GWDFC, the proceeds to benefit Children's Hospital (the first was "Three of a Kind") and "Grave Secrets" is what happened.

It's a first season *Forever Knight* story which surprised me somewhat—after viewing the episode "Last Knight," I didn't think I'd ever get back the humor and lighter touch that so beautifully balanced the inherent drama of first season *Forever Knight*. I basically knew what the story was about and where it would go, but that was about it. When I actually sat down at my keyboard, Schanke started talking.

'Hello,' I thought, 'this is going to be a second season story.'

But then that mention of Denise Ford appeared. Nick obviously thought LaCroix was dead and was still very casual around Natalie. Janette was in control of the Raven.

'Well, what do you know, it's a *first* season story.'

I suppose that's how these things happen. It was a joy to write, even if the end does turn rather farcical (don't blame me—this is their story and they ran with it, I just took dictation).

A brief note—this is a publication for charity. This story is only available through the GWDFC, not on the internet or anywhere else. So if your friend wants a copy, do the kids a favor and tell them where they can buy it, or buy it for them yourself, if you're a great-souled person.

I hope you enjoy the story. Thanks for your contribution to Children's Hospital on behalf of the GWDFC.

Regards

Susan M. Garrett



# Chapter One



"Looks like the place Myra goes to get her palm read," said Schanke, turning to survey the heavy green velvet draperies that hung over the windows.

The golden sash cords swung lightly in the wake of their passing. Nick caught the movement from the corner of his eyes and dismissed it, shooting his partner a smile. "She really believes that stuff, huh?"

"Are you kidding? Tea leaves, palm readings, tarot cards, wax drippings . . ." Rolling his eyes, Schanke made his way around a police officer, who was kneeling and meticulously checking the thick, oriental rug with a flashlight. "Get this—her new thing is 'rune' stones. Rocks with these symbols—I dunno, some sort of foreign language or something. You ask me, she's got rocks in her head."

"Yeah," said Nick noncommittally. "Maybe."

Schanke half-turned and eyed his partner incredulously. "You believe in that stuff?"

"I . . . don't know." He lowered his eyes, murmuring, "Denise." She had been a psychic—a genuine psychic—who had seen through his mortal disguise to his true nature. The images of his past history hadn't made sense to her, had nearly driven her mad. To save her sanity he had told her the truth, but she'd lost her life while trying to save the life of a kidnap victim. He hadn't been able to save her.

Schanke sobered, nodding slowly at his hesitation. "Denise Ford . . . yeah." He scratched the side of his head and started walking again, adding, "Shame about that. Nice girl. If she really saw the future . . . Hell, Nonna Schanke said she could always tell when company was coming." He stopped as if suddenly bewildered and gestured with his hands. "Every time we showed up at her place unannounced, she came to the door with a huge tray of canoles and kruskiky."

Nick's smile softened. "Sounds like she was lonely."

Schanke blinked and frowned, as if entertaining that notion for the first time. "Yeah," he admitted grudgingly. "It coulda been that."

They stopped at a wire stretched across a section of hallway, with yellow police tape hanging from it at intervals. It was about five feet from the ground, and a pool of blood spread beneath and to either side of it, making the hall virtually impassable.

"What the hell—?" asked Schanke, his hand moving forward.

Nick grasped his partner's wrist just as Natalie called, "Don't touch that!" from further down the hall. Hurrying toward them and standing on the other



side of the pool of blood, she added, "*That* is your murder weapon. And it's razor-sharp."

"Murder weapon?" Nick craned his neck. Sure enough, further down the hall he spotted a body lying on the floor, a trail of blood running the length of the carpet.

"Decapitation." Taking a pencil out from behind her ear, Natalie gestured at the door some distance behind them. "Your victim must have been running. He hit *this*," she pointed at the wire. "Complete decapitation—had to be instantaneous."

Schanke's eyes narrowed. "Excuse me for asking, but if the murder happened here, how come the body's down *there*?"

"Momentum." Natalie caught Nick's eyes and, with the barest movement of her head, indicated that he join her down the hall.

"Let's take a look," said Nick. With great care, he ducked beneath the wire, then made his way over the darkening pool of blood in the hallway, not wanting to disturb the evidence.

Schanke followed, reaching up his hand to take hold of the wire for balance, then drawing it away quickly. Ducking beneath it, but keeping a careful eye on it as he passed underneath, he also made his way over the bloody stain on the carpet. "He must have been a sprinter to have picked up enough speed for that to take his head off," he noted darkly. Turning to Natalie, he asked, "The victim is a he, then?"

"From what I know of basic anatomy—yeah. The head rolled over there—" When Schanke moved on to see what had become of the unfortunate victim's head, Natalie caught Nick's arm and drew him to one side. "He's right," she whispered. "No one could move fast enough to decapitate himself on that wire—not from the doorway to the spot he was killed."

Drawing a long breath, Nick walked over to the body and glanced down. "No *mortal*," he corrected.

The body was male, as Natalie had said, wearing tailored trousers that still held a fine and precise crease. The black shoes shone brilliantly—where they weren't spotted with blood. The shirt was white linen, with a flounce at the throat, the jacket cut from the same cloth as the suit at first glance, each spotted with blood and gore from the decapitation.

Natalie was standing behind him—her presence was palpable, as was her nervousness. "Then he's . . . one of yours?"

"Like me? Probably." The clothing meant little to him . . . just odd enough to indicate a fascination with the past, a longing for what had been lost.

"He's dead, right? I mean, once I get back to the lab, he's not going to get up and walk away on me, is he?"

Nick's smile was grim. "No. He's not coming back. That's part of the litany—a stake through the heart, sunlight or fire, decapitation." He paused and swallowed, then tore his gaze from the body and looked at her. "That's



what LaCroix's always said."

"So someone knew that wire would kill him." Natalie glanced back down the hall and tapped the pencil against her lips thoughtfully. "Someone knew he'd be fast enough to decapitate himself." She met Nick's eyes again, the realization striking her. "Our murderer could be a vampire, too."

"Or a mortal who knew he was a vampire," added Nick. He watched her face, the slightest change in her expression as she realized how select that club was to which she belonged—mortals who not only knew of but could prove the existence of vampires. Shaking his head, he started down the hallway after Schanke. "If it's even a murder."

Natalie kept pace with him, her voice low, as other officers and forensic people passed them. "Suicide?"

"It happens." He met her gaze again, then focused on the activity in the room at the end of the hall, trying to blot out the image of Erika. She had been a vampire, his friend, his companion, his lover . . . but there'd always been that darkness within her, the belief that when she was no longer of any use to the world, that she should take her leave. "After living so long, sometimes there's nothing left to live for." Feeling the fingers of her hand lightly touch his arm, he forced a smile for her benefit and glanced at her. "Or no one."

There was concern in Natalie's gaze—she knew how close to the edge Erika's suicide had pushed him. He reached to take her fingers in his own, gave them a reassuring squeeze, then allowed her hand to drop as he stepped forward, heading toward Schanke. "Found it?"

"Kinda hard to miss," noted Schanke, stepping to one side so that Nick could better view the remains. "You ever get the feeling we're the cops who show up in reel three of those slasher flicks?"

The instant of death had been captured in the expression; the features were familiar enough through the veil of spattered blood to be recognizable. The lump of panic and disgust rose in his throat, choking him.

There could be no doubt—

### *London 1817*

Nicholas handed off his gloves, cane, hat, and coat with the waist-length cape to the butler without a second thought. "Am I late?" he asked.

"You're expected, sir." Handing off his burden to the yet another servant, the butler preceded Nicholas upstairs to the drawing room.

The flickering wicks from the candelabra cast odd shadows as they passed and Nicholas wondered how soon he'd see the new gas lighting installed in the houses of his friends. The main thoroughfares were becoming brighter at night, the gas lamps well-tended, although the dimmer, more unsavory areas of London—where he hunted for his victims—were still lit by candles, if any light



was at all provided.

He waited at the doorway to the room while the butler announced, "Sir Nicholas Chevalier," gave the butler a nod as he passed, and entered the well-appointed room.

Candles appeared here, too, causing the gilding along the edges of the ceiling and walls to shine with a soft glow. Ashley Farrell was standing by the fireplace, the fire burning low and unsteady within it, a glass of sherry in his hand. The decanter sat on the mantle above the fireplace, beside the mahogany clock. Farrell seemed intent upon it, watching the candlelight reflect through the cut crystal of the decanter.

There was no card table and the Sheraton chairs sat to either side of the ottoman, nor was Lorinda Farrell present. For the first time that evening, Nicholas felt a sense of unease wash over him. "Will Miss Farrell be joining us for Speculation this evening?"

Ashley Farrell turned bleary eyes toward him—the man had been drinking, heavily. "Miss Farrell—" His words slightly slurred, he set his glass back upon the mantle and turned toward Nicholas. "Miss Farrell will *not* be joining us for Speculation this evening, or any other evening." He took a few unsteady steps across the room, toward Nicholas. "Nor any *other* evening. I've forbidden it."

He wanted to reach out and help Farrell to a chair. Instead, Nicholas stayed his ground, watching anxious as Farrell finally found some steadiness by gripping the lyre-shaped back of one of the wooden chairs as he stood behind it. "May I ask why?"

"Why? Oh . . . why." Farrell stared down at the carpeted floor for a length of time, then met Nicholas' gaze again, brown eyes hard and unyielding. "We have been good friends, Chevalier. You've been a good friend, to Lorinda and myself. But especially to Lorinda."

Nicholas straightened, facing down his companion's angry stare. "Miss Farrell is a charming young woman. She's intelligent, beautiful, excellent company . . . and she plays a deadly hand of Speculation."

"Yes, she's magnificent. But that's not the point." Lifting a hand from the chair, Farrell waved as if to brush away the notion, and nearly lost his balance. Righting himself before Nicholas could reach him, he met Nicholas' gaze again. "It's your intentions, Chevalier. You spend far too much time with my sister."

"In proper company, only. If she feels that I have made improper advances, I shall beg her pardon, and yours."

Farrell waved his hand again, this time with more control—he seemed steadier, as if his obvious anger was helping to shake off the effects of the alcohol. "Your advances could *never* be proper. You have misled her."

"I made no promises," said Nicholas quickly. "My intentions have always been honorable—"

"But you are in no position to wed, are you?" When Nicholas look away, he heard a long, low laugh from Farrell. "Hah! I'm right, aren't I? Lorinda's been



living for a dream, hasn't she?"

Clenching his fist, Nicholas fixed his gaze on the clock, opposite. It had to be Janette. She was always flirtatious. He'd been a fool to accompany her on the round of salons earlier this week, her hanging off his arm. To polite society, she was his cousin, a term vague enough to imply equal measures of propriety and impropriety. He'd not meant to hurt Lorinda or Farrell; that was the last thing he'd wanted.

Perhaps, if Janette consented to speak with Lorinda . . . or Farrell, properly chaperoned, of course. She could set this all right. If she was in a good mood, it would cost him not more than a necklace and some earrings, perhaps a new gown for her already impressive and fashionable collection.

But before he could manage to make the offer, Farrell suddenly released the back of the chair and stalked toward him, his eyes hooded and full of menace. "You, sir, are a *vampire*."

Even from his own lips, he'd never heard the word uttered with such venom. He stood frozen as Farrell poked a finger at his waistcoat. "Deny it!" he challenged. "Deny it if you dare. I have evidence. Proof!"

It was like a nightmare, a bad dream from which he couldn't escape. He stared as Farrell pulled a brass button from his own waistcoat pocket, then held it out to Nicholas, offering it for inspection. "Do you recognize this?"

It was his—one of his coat buttons. He forced a smile as he stared at it, knowing that the coat the butler had taken must be missing one. He'd never noticed that it was gone. The image had been one suggested by Janette when she'd ordered the coat for him, a surprise. The knight's helm over a sun had amused him at the time. He'd thanked her properly.

But now . . . he was no longer amused.

"From my coat—"

"From your coat—" echoed Farrell. His fingers clasped over the button and dropped it swiftly back into his pocket again, as if afraid Nicholas would steal it from his hand. "Do you remember, Tuesday last, when we played Speculation? Lorinda said that you looked ill—I noticed it as well. She thought you feverish, but when she touched your forehead, your skin was cold as ice."

Nicholas moved again, circling the ottoman, the hunter within him recognizing that this time he might as easily become prey. "I was indisposed."

"So we ended the evening early, said that we would continue tonight?" Farrell was all but daring him to contract the facts they both knew well. "Not long after you left, a cry went up from the street. Lorinda was afraid it might be a fire, so I went out to see. There was a body found in an area of Marsh lane. He was a rowdy and a pick-pocket—I've seen the man skulking along the lane before."

He stood behind the ottoman now. He'd been trying to abstain from blood again and had chanced a visit to the Farrells' despite his rabid hunger. Yes, Nicholas knew about the body. He'd murdered the man when he'd bumped



against him in the dark, when the man had attempted to pick his pocket. He'd fled when he'd heard a member of the watch nearby. "Yes?" he said, his voice almost a whisper.

"The watchman stumbled upon him while he was still warm. While he ran to call the constable, I said I'd stand by the body. But the man's hand was clenched around something. I pressed open his fingers."

Nicholas remembered now; the man had grabbed his coat as he'd parted the collar and sunk his teeth into the dirt-stained flesh of his neck. He pushed the body away from him—the button had torn from his coat.

"There's a rational explanation," he said, forcing a smile, and then abandoning it when he realized how predatory he looked. "The button fell from my coat when I left. The man must have found it, perhaps had it in his hand when he was assaulted."

"There were wounds in his neck." Farrell was staring now, but not at him—it was as if he were looking at the memory of the scene. "I saw something like that in Greece last year, in the hills. The shepherds said it was a vrykolakas, a vampire. It moved only at night—the sun burned it. It ate no food, but fed from the blood of sheep . . . or men and women, if they were alone. It feared fire and the cross." His eyes widened and he stared at Nicholas. "I saw them run one to ground at dawn, on a hill. It fell to the earth, smoking, screaming. They drove a stake through its heart, then hacked off its head."

He swallowed, but forced himself to meet Farrell's shocked gaze. "And you think that I killed the man? That I'm like the poor devil you saw the shepherds kill? That I'm a . . . vampire?"

The ease of his tone brought Farrell back to himself, but his scowl remained in place. He returned to the mantle and picked up his glass of sherry, watching Nicholas all the while. "You never go out during the day—to the hunts, the races, the clubs—"

"I have business."

"You don't attend church. Nor do you eat or drink in public. No—" he said quickly, holding up a hand and forestalling Nick's aborted protest. "I know you claim a weak stomach. And you've had sherry and wine in my company."

"Yes, I have, haven't I?" Nicholas moved closer to him. The thrum of Farrell's heartbeat sounded in his ears. He concentrated on the man's eyes. The alcohol would only muddle things. Catch the eyes, that was the way. Keep his voice even and pleasant.

"You don't believe any of this," he said, in a strong and steady tone of voice. "You don't believe in vampires. You've known me for six months, Farrell. We've been friends—good friends. I have nothing but respect and friendship for yourself and your sister—"

Farrell echoed his words at first. "Nothing but respect—"

But then his hand lost hold of the glass of sherry. The glass fell to the stone apron before the fireplace; the alcohol spilled into the flames when the glass



broke. The fire followed the line of liquid and Nicholas jumped back, startled.

When he looked up, he knew that he had lost his hold on Farrell . . . and perhaps a good deal more.

"You're a vampire," said Farrell, his eyes wide, suddenly fearful. He raced to the door, calling for the butler. "Bathory!"

Moving quickly, Nicholas reached the door first. He placed a hand over Farrell's mouth and pushed him back against the wall, pinioning him with one hand on the man's chest.

"Listen to me," he hissed. "I won't hurt you—just *listen* to me. I'll tell you the truth. That's what you want to hear, isn't it? I won't hurt you *or* your sister. I swear! Will you listen to me, if I release you?"

There was a hesitation on Farrell's part, then a slight nod. Nicholas took his hand away from the man's mouth then, when Farrell didn't scream, stepped back. "It's true," he admitted. "I'm a vampire."

Farrell stared at him, his gaze more angry than frightened now. "How dare you! How dare you enter my home, make advances to my sister—!"

"There were no advances," said Nicholas quickly, his hand held out to placate Farrell. "I was seeking friendship, companionship. I meant no harm. What I am . . . it's like a curse." Walking over to the chair, he seated himself and stared at the fire. "I can control it, sometimes. I fight it whenever I can."

"You must leave. Now."

Nicholas stared up at the face of his former friend. "I'll never bother you again."

"Not just here—London. You must leave or . . . or I'll tell everyone what I know."

A cold chill passed through him at the threat. "Don't say that, even in jest." He rose from the chair and straightened, settling the full force of his will against Farrell. "You'd not be believed. And you'd be killed before you could be believed—your sister, as well."

Farrell's eyes were hard and he smiled bitterly. "You'd never hurt her."

"You're right. I wouldn't. But others . . ." He let the sentence trail off, saw the doubt flicker in Farrell's mind. "You must tell no one, for your own protection."

There was a long-considered nod from Farrell. "All right," he relented. "If you leave London. You can settle your affairs and be gone in three days. After that—I make no promises."

It was the best he could hope for. Nicholas lowered his head and sighed. "I have your word?"

"You have my oath on it."

He placed his hand on the door, then turned for a moment and regarded Farrell thoughtfully. "Have you told Lorinda?"

It was an unpardonable breach of etiquette, to have used her name. Farrell blinked, then seemed to recognize the unusual nature of their conversation as



permitting such an intimacy. "She knows nothing."

"Make certain that remains the case. Tell her . . . tell her that I've gone to the continent on business. In a few months, I'll send her a letter through your care, announcing my engagement, advising her not to write to me, as I'll be traveling and had no idea of my destination."

Farrell took a breath. "There would be no future letters?"

"None."

"Then that is acceptable."

Nicholas stared at Ashley Farrell. For six months they'd been good friends. One was taught to treasure such moments of friendship shared, so rare from century to century. What was there to say?

"Forgive me," he whispered. "Forgive me."

Then he opened the door and left, intending never to return to the drawing room in which he'd spent so many happy hours.

"Farrell," he'd whispered, before he could stop himself.

"You know him?" asked Schanke.

Nick turned away quickly, coughing to dislodge the lump in his throat. "No. No—I—"

"Cause his name's Ashley St. Valentine." Schanke glanced at a notebook in his hand. "The on-scene officer said the delivery kid from the local market was dropping off a package. The front door was open; he saw the body and ran next door to call the cops."

"At least he had the good sense to use the phone next door," said Natalie, moving between Nick and Schanke.

"Yeah. Said he watched a lot of cop shows on TV and didn't want to leave his prints on anything. Smart kid." Schanke moved past Natalie and touched Nick's shoulder. "Nick—you look green around the gills."

"Fine. I'll be fine." Shrugging his shoulders, Nick turned, found himself staring at St. Valentine's-Farrell's severed head, and barked, "Would somebody throw something over that, already?"

"Geez," Schanke said sotto voce to Natalie, as he passed her, "didn't think something like this would shake *him* that badly."

Catching the comment, Nick focused on Natalie, whose eyes were cautious. "Time of death?" he asked.

Concentrate on the crime. Center on it. Focus on it.

"Without an autopsy and the way that blood's crusted on the carpet, I'd say over eight hours. I can give you a better idea when we get the body back to the station." She kept pace with him as he left the room, adding in a quieter tone, "A friend?"

"A long time ago. Yeah." Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that someone had placed a body-bag over the severed head. "You were right."



"He was a vampire?"

"Yeah. And . . . it *could* have been suicide."

Before Natalie could pry further, Schanke returned, holding a transparent, sealed evidence bag that contained a sheet of paper. "Lookie what we have here," he announced. "A suicide note."

Nick took the note by grabbing the top of the plastic bag so as not to smear any fingerprints that might be lifted from the paper. The edges were scalloped and the paper was thin, almost transparent. The hand was fine, the writing thin and spidery.

Decades later and he could still discern Farrell's accurate and elegant hand.

"I have traveled too long," he read aloud. "There is nothing for me here. My love to my dearest Todd. My attorney has my final wishes. Do not look for me—I will not be found alive nor dead."

"He got the last part wrong," noted Schanke, taking the suicide note as Nick released it. "If the prints and the handwriting don't match up, at least it give us a suspect. I think we want to have a little talk with Todd."

"A long talk," amended Nick grimly, as Natalie took custody of the evidence. "A *very* long talk."





# Chapter Two



Todd Payton couldn't have been older than Ashley St. Valentine appeared—in his late twenties. He had black hair that was buzz cut at the temples and his bangs were moussed into an upward curl. He eyes were large and languid, his lips pouty, and his expression seemed set in a perpetual sneer.

Nick disliked him instantly.

"I keep telling you," repeated Payton, his tone barely containing his annoyance. "I was at a party."

"When did you return to 115 Leslie Street?" asked Schanke.

Payton rolled his eyes. "About two hours ago. All I know is I show up at my own front door, these two guys with badges and uniforms grab me, ask me who I am, and tell me I'm going downtown." He sighed dramatically. "Give a guy a chance to grieve, why don't you? Ashley's . . . Ashley's *dead* for God's sake."

Schanke banged on the table with the flat of his hands, got up and walked toward the wall of the interrogation room in disgust. Nick leaned forward in his chair and clasped his hands together. Looking up, he nodded at Payton. "This is all routine, okay? We just need some information. Work with us and we'll get through this sooner."

Payton's lip curled a little more, then he shifted sideways in the chair and nodded. "Okay."

"How long did you know Ashley St. Valentine?"

"We met at a party about . . . uh, it's gotta be two years ago. Over two years—he made a big point of celebrating our two year anniversary."

"What kind of a party?" asked Schanke.

"I dunno. A party. It was somebody's birthday or something." Payton hesitated, his sneer disappearing for a minute as he stared intently at Nick. "He really did it, didn't he? Killed himself?" Shaking his head, he added, "I didn't think he was serious. He was always talking about it, but . . ."

Schanke turned and leaned his back against the wall. "Your roommate's been talking about suicide and you didn't do anything?"

"Roommates?" Payton grinned, almost leered. "Hey, we were *more* than roommates. You know, people have fights. Ashley didn't like fights. He'd always start whining about how it was all his fault and he was gonna go off and kill himself and—Christ, he did it, didn't he?" Payton's fingers twitched on the table-top and he looked up, suddenly composed. "You got a cigarette?"

Nick shook his head. Schanke held up his palms and said, "Sorry. I'm on the wagon." He walked closer to the table and leaned on it. "Maybe we can get you a pack? Menthol?"

"Yeah. Marlboro, if you got 'em."

Schanke nodded and gestured toward the window in the doorway, miming smoking a cigarette, then turned back to Payton. "When did the party start?"

"Monday night, around ten." Payton shifted again in his chair, swinging toward Schanke. "Ashley was supposed to go with me. We had a fight Monday afternoon. I told him if he didn't go with me, I'd walk out on him. He threw a tantrum and I left the house."

"When was that?" asked Nick.

"Five, maybe six o'clock."

"And you went . . . where?"

Payton glanced up at Schanke. "Walked for an hour. Grabbed some food—hot-dog vendor on Yonge. Then I went to the party."

"What kind of a party was this?" asked Nick. "You got to a party Monday night at ten and you return home nine o'clock Tuesday night?"

"I told you; I was pissed at Ashley. I was looking to take out my frustrations." A sly grin sneaked across Payton's lips. "Found somebody at the party looking to let off a little steam, too. Figured it would piss off Ashley. I wanted to hurt him."

"Hurt him *how*?" asked Schanke, pushing his face close to Payton. "By killing him?"

"Kill him? I *loved* him." Payton pushed his seat back and crossed one leg over his lap. "Look, you gonna get me those cigarettes?"

Payton's smug attitude finally got to him.

"You want cigarettes?" Leaning across the table, Nick's arm flashed out, faster than either Payton or Schanke could see. He grabbed Payton's shirtfront and lifted him up out of his chair. "You want cigarettes?"

A knock on the outer door startled. Nick dropped Payton back into the seat as an officer leaned inside. "Capt. Stonetree wants to talk to one of you."

"You take it," said Schanke, grabbing Nick's shoulder and pulling him out from behind the table.

Nick hesitated, glaring at Payton for effect, then turned back to Schanke and added ingenuously, "If you wanna take it—?"

"No, I really think *you* should." He planted his hand between Nick's shoulder blades, propelled him forward with a push, then returned to the table and seated himself. Before the door closed, Nick heard him say, "Okay, so you were at this party—"

Captain Stonetree was waiting just outside the interrogation room. "You got a minute?"

"Looks like I've got more than that." Nick folded his arms and leaned back against a nearby desk. "What's happened?"

"We've gotten hold of St. Valentine's attorney."

Nick licked his lips—there was blood in the air. "Yeah?"

"There's a will. Turns out you're grilling the only beneficiary right now."



The estate's worth two million." Stonetree smiled grimly. "Hell of a motive for a murder."

"Yeah. If it is a murder."

Stonetree's smile disappeared. "You got doubts?"

Nick looked away, shrugging. "The suicide note, Payton's verifiable alibi . . ."

"Who commits suicide by running into a razor sharp wire?" When Nick nodded glumly, Stonetree smiled, "Kinda odd for a suicide, if you ask me."

"At least it's different. It's got style."

Stonetree stared at him, lips pursed. "Nick, don't take this the wrong way . . . but you're weird."

"Thanks, Captain."

"The point is," Stonetree gestured over his shoulder, toward the interrogation room behind them, "St. Valentine's lawyer is Payton's lawyer. And he wants Payton released now, or he wants to come down here and watch us charge Payton with Ashley's murder. Which I gather we don't have enough evidence to make stick?"

"That's pretty much the situation," admitted Nick.

"That's what I thought."

Had Payton known that Ashley was a vampire? If they'd been lovers, as Payton had intimated, how could Payton *not* have known? Then again if that were so, how could he still be alive?

Taking a deep breath, Nick lowered his head, then met Stonetree's gaze. "Can you give me a minute? I'd like to spring the will on Payton before we release him. See which way he jumps."

Stonetree looked up at the clock. "You've got ten minutes."

"I'll take five," promised Nick, heading back into the interrogation room. He knocked once, then opened the door and slipped inside. Schanke was on his feet again and there was a pack of cigarettes in front of Payton. One, lit and smoking, was left in the ashtray.

"Look who's back," noted Payton. He slumped in his chair and glared up at Schanke. "Can I get outta here now?"

"In a second," answered Nick. Crossing in front of Schanke, he gave a slight tilt of his head, letting him know that something was up. Picking up a chair, Nick turned it with the back facing Payton, then seated himself, his gaze fixed on Payton the entire time. "So, two years, huh? You and Ashley must have meant something special to one another."

For a moment, Todd Payton looked uncomfortable. "Yeah," he admitted grudgingly. "We were close."

"Close . . . how? Like shared bank accounts close? Like sharing clothes close? Like owning a house together close?"

Payton shifted in his chair. "Ashley owed the house. I'm a model, but work's been scarce, you know? He's been taking care of the bills lately. He

knows I'm good for it." For a moment, his head lowered. "He *knew* I was good for it," he amended, quietly. "That's why all this talk of killing himself . . . it spooked me the first two or three times, you know? He kept saying he'd been here too long, it was time to move on, stuff like that. Even showed me that he'd put me in his will." Shivering, like a cold chill had gone up his spine, he looked to Schanke. "But he kept saying stuff like that every time we'd fight. I didn't take it seriously any more. And then . . . this."

"Yeah," echoed Nick. "*This.*"

There was silence in the room. Nick glanced over at Schanke and nodded. Schanke moved forward and picked up the package of cigarettes, which he placed in Payton's hand. "Thanks, Mr. Payton. That'll be all for now."

Surprised, Payton looked up at Schanke, then over at Nick. "I can leave?"

"We're finished, for now," said Schanke. "But you leave your number and an address where we can reach you at the desk. We've got a lot of loose ends to clean up on this and we could use your help."

"Okay." Payton grinned and rose to his feet. "Yeah." He headed out the door and into the precinct.

Nick followed, with Schanke close behind. They hesitated just outside the interrogation room door and watched Payton make his way through the bullpen and out to the front information desk.

Stonetree joined them. "The will?"

"He knew about it," said Nick glumly. "Volunteered the information."

"Like he had nothing to hide," added Schanke. He raised an eyebrow and looked at Stonetree. "How big's the estate?"

"Two million."

Schanke let out a low whistle, which caught Payton's attention. Nick turned quickly so that Payton couldn't tell that they'd been watching him—perhaps too quickly. When he looked back, Payton was still staring at him. Then the look of amazement on Todd Payton's face faded and was replaced by a tight-lipped grin.

The sight made him want to shudder. Shrugging it off, Nick looked at Stonetree. "Can we get a copy of that will? I'd like to take a look at it."

"What, severed heads too much excitement for you? Thinking about going into probate law?" said Schanke.

"Something like that."

Stonetree nodded. "The lawyer seemed pretty cooperative. The number's on your desk. Get him to fax you a copy. You think you'll find something in there?"

"I don't know." Shaking his head, Nick concentrated for a moment, but it wasn't coming to him. "There was something Payton said, the way something was phrased—" He reached out a hand as if to grab the elusive thought, then brought his fingers together and let the hand drop to his side. "Maybe looking at the will can shake it loose."



"Speaking of 'loose,' what the hell happened in there earlier?" asked Schanke. "I thought I was supposed to be the 'bad' cop."

"I went with the moment," said Nick, shrugging. "Your problem is you need to be more flexible."

"Flexible?" Schanke lifted his chin, adjusting the back of his neck with his hand. "Flexible I can deal with, but a 180 degree turn—man, we've gotta work out some signals or something."

"You two detectives get your signals *uncrossed* and get back to work on this one. By this time tomorrow evening, I wanna know if St. Valentine's death was suicide or homicide. Understand?"

"Understood, Captain," said Schanke. As Nick walked back to their desks, he followed. "You know, signals might not be a bad idea. We used to use this signal for a knuckleball in high school—"

Nick distantly listened to Schanke. There was something in Payton's last smile that disturbed him. Was it possible that a mortal who'd had an opportunity to observe a vampire at close range for a long period of time could spot other vampires?

It was a theory he didn't look forward to putting to the test.

Nicholas knew he could put his affairs in order within three days, within a single evening if need be. He would simply take a ferry across the channel and hide himself in a stateroom during the daylight hours. Once in France he would be free to pursue whichever avenue of escape presented itself . . . until LaCroix found him again.

As he threw his traveling bag upon the bed, the thought of LaCroix gave him pause. LaCroix would merely see this as yet another one of his attempts to escape his master's reach. Janette would think it to be nothing more than that, surely. It was close enough to dawn that he would bid them good morning, head for his room, slip out the window and then race the sun to the docks. There he would find a boat with a Captain eager for a handful of solid currency, who knew enough not to ask too many questions.

Deciding that this was the best course of action, he began to race about the room, collecting those few belongings that he could not bear to leave behind. The cross of St. Joan traveled on his person, as always, but there were letters or books, or items of clothing that he would need to maintain the lifestyle of a young, moneyed gentleman of leisure in France.

Last, but not least, were the letters of credit for his French accounts—a few tucked into his case and others on his person as a precaution. Tossing his cloak over a chair, he sat down on the bed with a sigh, knowing that he was ready to leave, as Farrell had demanded.

Poor Lucinda. Nicholas stared down at the backs of his hands and thought of her slim fingers in his own. Truly, he hadn't meant to mislead her about his



intentions—he sought her friendship, to be yet another older brother, a guardian for her. Fool to think that she wouldn't misread his kindness as merely that, his intent expression as his interest in her thoughts, his laughter as simple appreciation for her sense of humor.

Or, had that been all there was to it? If Farrell had thought this, had many others made the same mistake? Janette's sudden inclusion in her whirl through the salons of the city began to make sense. It could be no more than simple jealousy on her part . . . or it could have been an attempt to draw him away from a dangerous entanglement in mortal society.

Striking his fist against his leg, Nicholas berated himself. He'd been blinded by the few moments of happiness, of being accepted as pleasant company in polite society, of pretending that he was mortal to see the danger in which he'd placed himself, as well as Janette and LaCroix. Better that he should leave. Tonight.

But there were footsteps on the stairs and a peal of laughter from Janette. Tossing his traveling bag over to the far side of the bed, he covered it with the hanging edge of the coverlet to further conceal its presence. He removed one boot and was making a great show of removing the other when there was a knock on the door of his chamber.

There was no need to answer. The door opened and Janette peered around the corner of the doorway. "Nichola?"

"Back so soon?" he asked, favoring her with a smile.

She swooped into the room, her feather-decked bonnet swinging from her arm. The muslin fabric of her underdress clung to her natural curves, dampened, as was the fashion, and the overdress floated like the light veil of fairy-cloth. She was, as usual, dressed in the height of fashion and such a vision that his breath left him for a moment.

It returned long enough for him to answer, "Good evening," as she seated herself on the bed beside him, wrapped her arm around his neck, and greeted him with a far from proper kiss.

He realized that this could be a problem—if Janette decided to spend the daylight hours with him, he'd never escape unnoticed into the remnants of the darkness. Then again, he considered—as his arms moved around her and Janette made no attempt to escape his embrace—an escape the following evening would still allow him to fulfill the oath he'd made to Farrell. In fact, if he pretended to be out on an errand, he might not be missed until the next dawn . . . at which point it would be impossible for LaCroix to follow for another day.

The merits of the plan slipped his mind momentarily when he was distracted by a sound from the doorway.

Nicholas gave Janette's lips a final peck, settled her more comfortably against him—somehow, she'd found her way halfway into his lap—and looked up at the master.

No matter what the age, LaCroix dressed impeccably. Black was his chosen

color despite the dictates of fashion and there were few to find fault with his choice from any level of society. He wore a double-breasted jacket, black of course, against a crisply starched shirt. His cravat was white and his black trousers were close cut, revealing the fine leather of his boots. Tossing his black leather gloves into the interior of his curl-brimmed hat, he glanced down at Nicholas and Janette almost fondly.

"How I love to see my children at play," he announced, his voice containing more than a modicum of warmth.

They'd been drinking—both blood and wine and in equal measures it seemed. Nicholas could taste it on Janette's lips and her skin was less cool to the touch than was their wont. There was a flash in LaCroix's eyes, a satiated look, and his skin was almost the color of healthy, mortal flesh.

"We expected to see you at the ball, Nicholas."

LaCroix's tone was congenial, but there was an underlying note of inquiry. Seeking the lesser of two evils and the easier distraction, Nicholas turned his attention to Janette, whose weight was still balanced on his left leg. "You seemed to have a good time without me."

"Oh, you should have seen it!" Janette laughed again. Two young officers and their ladies collided on the dance floor. One wore such a heavy and sharp bracelet that she slit the arm of the other woman. Blood was flying *everywhere*." She laughed and closed her eyes, throwing her head back and giggling, as if reliving the moment.

"It almost resulted in a duel. Unfortunately, saner heads prevailed," noted LaCroix, with no small amount of sangfroid. He leaned his back against the doorframe and met Nicholas with a steady, measuring glance. "Lord Farrell and his sister were absent from the ball. I thought perhaps you might have joined them for a game of cards."

It didn't pay to lie—not completely. Somehow, LaCroix would know.

"I intended to do so, but when I arrived, I found that Miss Farrell wasn't well and Farrell didn't much feel like playing. So I came back here."

"You missed a lovely ball," Janette told him, leaning close so that her dark ringlets tickled his neck.

Nicholas turned his head to kiss her cheek, then gave her waist a squeeze. She giggled and he enjoyed the outrageousness of the sound. Janette generally had too much self-possession to indulge in the current feminine custom of giggling.

"Are you taking a trip to the country, then?" asked LaCroix.

He froze in mid-kiss and tried to recover, but the damage had been done—he felt a sudden stiffness in Janette's posture. As he pulled his head back, she stared at him wide-eyed, as if entreating him to deny the accusation and not to ruin her delightful evening.

"What makes you say that?" he asked LaCroix.

LaCroix gestured with his cane, pointing first to the traveling cloak spread



over the chair and then to the bag just visible on the other side of the bed from where he stood in the doorway.

"I was . . . I was thinking of returning to Paris for a few months." He turned his attention to Janette and gave her waist another squeeze. "The season will just be starting there. There'll be balls every night for a month, enough to tire even you."

This time there was no giggling, no delighted squeal. Suddenly sober, Janette slipped off his leg and onto the bed, distancing herself from him. She knew something was wrong. In her eyes, he saw the desire to help and protect him warring with her overwhelming instinct for survival.

"Do you think it wise to travel now, leaving that Farrell affair unfinished?"

Swallowing, Nicholas let his attention return to LaCroix, hoping that he was wrong, but somehow certain that LaCroix *knew*. "I took my leave of Farrell tonight."

"I assume, then, that you killed him?"

Janette gave the slightest intake of breath. Nicholas, stunned, shook his head slightly. After a moment he managed what he hoped was a firm, "No," but was afraid to volunteer anything more.

"He knows that you're a vampire. Didn't he tell you?" There was a certain satisfaction in LaCroix's tone of voice. "He's told no one else—there's no fear on that account for the moment—but it's only a matter of time. You must kill him, Nicholas, before he connects your nature with us. And then I will have no recourse but to take matters into my own hands."

Nicholas half rose from the bed, some impulse driving him to launch himself at LaCroix, but Janette held his arm, keeping him in place. "Surely you can make him forget?" she asked, her voice a note higher than normal. "He *can* be made to forget—"

"I tried," whispered Nicholas, his eyes still locked with LaCroix's. "He resisted me—I couldn't hold him."

"Then he must be killed," said LaCroix.

The statement was simple and succinct. Only now did Nicholas look away, vainly searching his brain for some answer, *any* answer, that might save the life of his friend. "No," he whispered. "No. I won't allow it."

"Truly, Nicola, it is *only* one life," said Janette. She pulled herself closer to him, wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. "The girl may still be spared. If he's not told her . . . and even if he has, she may be easily made to forget. Her brother perishes in an accident. She'll inherit quite a fortune. In a few years time, with a good marriage, she'll begin her life anew—"

They were devoted to one another, Ashley and Lorinda Farrell. As a Viscount, Farrell's holding were small, but enough for them. Their family had died in a fever. Nicholas shook his head, knowing that Ashley's death would wound Lorinda beyond healing. She would follow him to the grave within the year, if

LaCroix did not arrange for that fate a bit sooner.

He turned toward LaCroix and held his hands out, palms upward. "Please," he said softly. "Don't kill them."

The corner of LaCroix's lip turned upward. He seemed surprised and, for a moment, seemed to relax, as if he'd been prepared for a physical assault on his person. "Are you *asking* me to spare them?"

"I'm *begging* you to spare them," said Nicholas. He took a step closer to his master. "They've done no harm. Farrell's concerned about his sister—she knows nothing about this. He only knows about me and he's promised to keep my secret if I leave within three days."

"And you . . . are prepared to do this? To save his life?"

"Yes. I was going to France but . . . if there's somewhere else you'd wish me to go . . . ." He allowed the sentence to trail off. He'd surprised LaCroix with his request. "Please?" he repeated. "You *can* do this for me. Please choose to."

For an instant, he imagined a subtle shift in LaCroix's features—but it must have been imagined. LaCroix nodded, after a moment. "You do realize that what you're asking may endanger Janette and me?"

"It won't!" promised Nicholas fervently. "Farrell knows nothing."

"He knows something. And now I find myself in the position of needing to protect you, as well as myself and Janette . . . and you beg me not to?" Crossing the floor, LaCroix knocked Nicholas' traveling coat from the chair with the end of the cane and then seated himself. He laid his cane across his lap and looked up at Nicholas. "If you will take responsibility for this . . . all right, yes. I'll agree not to kill Lord Farrell. *Or* his sister," he added, before Nicholas could ask.

"Will you swear?" asked Nicholas, his heart in his throat.

There was a raised eyebrow, an annoyed sign that led Nicholas to believe that he'd pressed the matter too far. But then LaCroix relented. "I swear."

There was an annoyed sound from Janette, but LaCroix shushed her simply with a movement of his hand. He stared up at Nicholas. "I'll have to deliver a warning, of course. Just to make certain Lord Farrell understands the consequences should he break the agreement he has with you."

Nicholas was almost too delirious to care. "Of course. Yes. That would be—"

"I'll take care of that myself," noted LaCroix.

There was silence between them, then LaCroix glared up at him with an imperious gaze. "I believe proper protocol demands some word of thanks, does it not?"

"Thank you." Half bowing, he took LaCroix's hand in his own and brought the ancient ring to his lips. "Thank you."

LaCroix placed a hand to his shoulder, drawing Nicholas closer. "Let us hope," he said sharply, "that neither of us has cause to regret this moment in the near future."



Nicholas merely lifted LaCroix's hand and pressed his lips to the ring again, swearing his own form of fealty. Whatever portion of his soul this request had cost, it was worth it. Simply by asking, he'd saved the lives of his friends.

He could have hoped for no more than that in the best of worlds.

The Raven was noisy, as usual. Nick sat at the bar for the better part of an hour, scanning the crowd and nursing the glass of cow blood and wine. He was just about to give up when her perfume wafted over him. Turning, he found Janette standing beside his stool.

She gave him her cheek to kiss and he did so, then both of them turned their gazes toward the crowd, as if in accord.

"Ashley Farrell is dead," he told her.

There was a brief intake of breath on her part. "What happened to 'Hello, Janette,' or 'Good evening, Janette'? You really *must* learn to respect the social niceties."

"He's dead. I saw the body."

"Stake?" she asked, with the fainted note of inquiry.

"Decapitation."

"Nichola, you *must* work on your small talk." She snapped her fingers not far from his ear and a few moments later he heard someone behind the bar scurry over with a glass of blood. When he turned to look at her, she was sipping with finesse, if a bit more speed than was common. She lowered the glass and gave him a tight smile. "Two suicides this close together . . ."

"It may have been murder."

She froze, glass to her lips, then very deliberately lowered her drink to the bar, her attention centered on it, rather than him. "You have a suspicion?"

"He had a companion—Todd Payton."

She shook her head as he watched her for some sign. "The name means nothing to me. Then again, Ashley's always had a companion. This is only the latest in a long line. A very *dead* long line." Smiling at her little joke, Janette picked up the glass and sipped at it again, but this time her pace was slow and thoughtful. "How *does* one commit suicide by decapitation?"

"String a razor sharp wire tightly at neck level across a small area and then run at top speed—"

Janette held up a hand and lowered her drink to the bar with the other. "Stop. You're making me queasy."

"You drank too fast."

"The problem is, I haven't had enough yet." She nodded after a moment, considering his explanation. "Yes, it's possible. Ashley always was one for style. He adored aesthetic sensibilities—the finer things. His 'companions,' as I remember, have always been pretty. Fundamentally male . . . but pretty. What's the latest like?"

"An out-of-work model."

"For lack of effort or looks?"

Nick grinned. "I don't think I'm the one to judge."

"Effort, then," decided Janette. She brushed her lace gloved finger across his cheek playfully. "That sort of thing has always made you squeamish." Janette briefly touched her finger to his lip and stopped there. "You think this 'Todd' may have killed him? If that's the case and unless his choice of murder weapon was a happy accident, that means he . . . ."

"Knows that vampires exist and that Farrell was a vampire? That's why I'm here."

"Oh, no, Nichola . . . not again?" Janette ran her finger down the side of his neck and drew closer. "Maybe this time you've learned, yes? Don't take the chance. *Kill him before it's too late.*"

He caught her hand with his own and straightened in his chair, moving away from her. "He's a suspect in a murder."

"A *possible* murder," she corrected. "Or a suicide. You said so yourself—"

"Which is even a better reason not to do anything until we know which it is."

She stared at him with a mixture of pity and despair. "All right, Nichola. But don't let it wait too long. LaCroix isn't here to clean up your messes. And if the Enforcers come . . . well, I won't be here, either."

He moved to kiss her and she turned her head away. Nick quickly moved to her other side and kissed her cheek. "You'll be here," he whispered. "For me, you'll be here."

"Don't count on it," she answered sharply.

Nick left her at the bar, still drinking her glass of blood-wine. By accident, she picked up his without looking and sipped at it. He waited at the door and grinned to see her reaction. When she turned and mouthed the word, "Cow," at him, he waved toward her and headed out into the night.





# Chapter Three



Schanke was just pulling off his coat as Nick walked into the precinct. His steps picked up speed when Schanke reached over to his desk and brandished a paper-clipped set of papers. "The will's here."

"Great." Without even removing his leather jacket, Nick dropped into his desk chair, took the pages from Schanke's hands, and skimmed the contents. The first two or three pages went by rather quickly—standard legalese. It was something on the fourth page that gave him pause.

He must have made a sound, because Schanke leaned over his own desk, trying to peer over the top of the pages. "Do I smell a motive?"

"No," answered Nick slowly. "But maybe an explanation." Placing the papers flat on the desk, he leaned over and followed the interesting passage with his index finger. "You see this amendment—it's dated two months ago? It says that if Ashley St. Valentine disappears, or leaves Toronto, a year and a day from the date of his disappearance, he's to be assumed dead and his estate goes to his heir, Todd Payton."

Schanke nodded, then looked up. "And that matters because—?"

"Say you're tired of the ratrace, tired of the money—" When Schanke raised an eyebrow, Nick added, "Just pretend, okay? You want to be able to walk away. You leave a will behind to tie up the loose ends a year and a day after you vanish so no one comes looking for you. You set up your life somewhere else, start fresh."

"Uh-huh. And that's why you wanted to see the will, because you thought something like this might be in there?"

From the look on Schanke's face, Nick got the distinct impression that his friend wasn't buying it. "It was something Payton said yesterday—St. Valentine had said it was time for him to 'move on.' Not 'end it'—*move on*."

"Which gave Payton hope of being a very rich boy soon," said Schanke, a smile forming as the motive began to fall into place. "But when St. Valentine didn't cash in his chips right away, Payton started to get worried. Maybe he checked with the lawyer. Maybe he realized that if a dead St. Valentine didn't turn up, he'd have to wait a year before he saw any money. Maybe . . . maybe he needs the money right now?"

Nick nodded, Schanke's deductions adding yet another piece to their puzzle. "Can you run that down tonight?"

"With a couple of bills to loosen some tongues, yeah." Schanke lifted his coat from the coat rack and shrugged into it. "I'll nail down every dime he owes, including the paper boy. You'll pick up the lab reports?"

"Consider it done."

Pausing for a moment, Schanke glanced down at the will. "The guy must have been knocked in the *cabeza* once too often. Who walks away from a million dollars? I should have that kind of trouble."

"Maybe you will, someday," said Nick, with a grin.

"Yeah. Right."

He watched Schanke leave, then picked up the will and thrust it into the St. Valentine case file. On the one hand, he was elated that he'd found exactly what he'd been looking for—Farrell *had* planned to move on, to end his life in Toronto and start somewhere else afresh. It wouldn't hold up in a court of law, but the signs were all too familiar. If Payton weren't a suspect, Nick would have had him confirm that small items that meant a lot to St. Valentine had gone missing lately, or been inexplicably moved elsewhere. There were arrangements to be made, shipping and transportation to be worked out. In this modern age, the law both helped and hindered them—the will was the perfect legal way to let someone else deal with the final entanglements of one life, so that another could be started elsewhere.

On the other hand . . . it meant that the suicide *was* a murder. Todd Payton was his prime suspect and that meant that Todd Payton had known that Ashley St. Valentine was a vampire.

Nick had a feeling that this was going to get very messy before it was all over.

He headed out the main door of the precinct. His car was parked just beyond the front doors of the building. He almost didn't see the thing coming toward him from his left side, but he caught the white blur from the corner of his eye. Instinctively, Nick reached up a hand and snatched it from the air.

He was holding a baseball, slightly worn around the seams. Tracing the trajectory was unnecessary—Todd Payton was standing in the shadows on one side of the doorway. His sneer in place, he sauntered up to Nick and took the ball from his hand.

"Thought so," he said.

Nick watched Payton toss the ball from hand to hand. "What did you think?"

"That you were a vampire, like Ash."

"I don't know what you're—"

The sneer changed to a look of hard contempt. "Don't bother denying it. It's a waste of time. And I don't have a lot of time to waste, do I?"

Nick stared into Payton's eyes. "You tell me." He could hear the mortal heartbeat thudding in his ears as he whispered, "Ashley St. Valentine wasn't a vampire. You don't believe in vampires. There are no such things as vampires—"

"There are no such things as—" echoed Payton, his eyes glazing over. "There are no such—" His hand went slack and the ball dropped from it. The sound made him start, his eyes glancing away—



Nick cursed himself, knowing that he'd lost the one chance he had to remove the existence of vampires from Payton's memory.

Payton picked up the ball, nearly losing his balance as he did so, then straightened and stared at Nick warily. "What was that?"

"What?" asked Nick, looking around.

"That—?" Payton shook his head. "Look—I'm not taking the rap for Ash's murder."

"Maybe you will and maybe you won't," said Nick flatly. "The jury's not in, yet."

"You're not gonna want that to happen." Payton flipped the ball from hand to hand again. "Cause if I have to stand up in court, I'm gonna have some story to tell. About what Ashley was. About what *you* are . . ."

Nick's hand shot out, grasping Payton's neck. His fingers squeezed, just enough to cause discomfort. "What makes you'd think you'd get the chance?"

Payton went perfectly still, allowing his hands to fall back to his sides. He stared into Nick's eyes, his smile forming into a sneer again. "Go ahead," he croaked, with what air he could manage to get into his lungs around Nick's grip on his throat. "Do it!"

He was tempted. Three hundred years ago, the sneer might have been reason enough to crush this murderer's throat. He would have killed and then fed, knowing that the evil he perpetrated had some small aspect of good within it, that he'd removed another piece of filth from the mortal world, saved some poor innocent soul down the line who would have been hurt or destroyed by someone like Payton.

Three hundred years was a long time. Time enough to detest the shedding of blood. He'd come to understand that even that was only an excuse. Murder to defend the secret of his existence was still murder. He didn't need another mortal soul on his conscience. Not this way. Not in cold blood.

Nick let his grip loosen, then his hand dropped away. He took a step back and wet his lips, trying to ignore the cold triumph in Payton's eyes.

"Ash was the same way," said Payton. "Didn't have the stomach for it."

"Don't imagine that others will be as lenient," said Nick, a warning note in his voice. If only LaCroix was still alive, and could be here to take care of this. What had Janette said? That LaCroix was no longer here to clean up his messes?

"I'm not worried about *others*. Just like I'm not worried about beating this murder rap, either. You've got nothing on me. It's all . . . what do you call it . . . circumstantial?"

"Are you sure?"

There was some small satisfaction in the way Payton's eyes narrowed. He stared at Nick, as if trying to determine whether or not he was telling the truth. He must have passed muster because Payton turned aside and muttered, "Shit!" Then he swung back quickly and pointed at Nick. "What have you got?"

"Fiber evidence. I'm just going to pick up the results now." Nick took a

breath and continued to look Payton straight in the eye—this might buy him some time. “Rug fibers from the hall carpet with St. Valentine’s blood on them were found on your sneakers. That puts you at the scene at the time of St. Valentine’s death—you said that you’d been at the party and the uniformed officers kept you from returning to the house, remember?”

“And that’s it?”

Payton’s breathing was shallow, his heartbeat quicker. Nick nodded solemnly. “It’s enough. It places you at the scene at the time of the murder. Without that, your story holds water.”

“But evidence can get lost, right?” pressed Payton. “That’s how it goes—if you can’t produce the evidence in court, it doesn’t mean shit.”

“It means a lot less,” said Nick. “Replacing the evidence would be better—get something with no relation to the crime scene and switch the contents of the envelope. Mistakes have been known to happen.”

“Well, that’s what’s happening this time.” Payton lowered his gaze, obviously taking his time. “Looks like we can help each other out.”

There were a dozen ways to play this and Nick wasn’t exactly certain which one to choose. He looked back over his shoulder, as if worried about being seen. “We can’t talk here.”

“Then we’ll talk back at my place.”

“I told you—I’m heading over to the lab to pick up results. And the rest of the evening’s booked—”

“Then you drop by tomorrow night, if the cops have cleared out by then. Bring the bag with you.” Payton’s sneer grew more pronounced. “After sunset. That’s when you guys hit the street, isn’t it?”

He ignored the statement and looked over his shoulder again, letting Payton think he was nervous. “What do I get out of this?” he asked sharply.

“I pretend you’re just like anybody else.”

“And that’s it? That’s the end of it?”

Payton just grinned. “My place, tomorrow night. Or you’ll be the top story on the eleven o’clock news.”

Nick stood there as Payton walked away, then headed toward the Caddie and drove away from the station. He’d been bluffing—he had no hard evidence that Payton was involved in Farrell’s murder. He had no hard evidence that Farrell was murdered. But he’d bought himself some time and confirmed his suspicion that Payton knew that he was a vampire.

The question now was what could he do about it, short of murdering his prime suspect?

Nicholas had been fastening the catch on his cloak when the knock sounded on the door and he’d admitted Farrell’s messenger to their quarters. As it was, he left the breathless messenger behind—along with a hefty tip and an admonition



to leave the premises as soon as possible—before making his own way to the West End house in which Farrell and his sister resided. He alighted in an alley not more than a block from the house and hastened there on foot, but at very mortal speeds due to the number of theatre-goers and dinner guests in transit at that early evening hour.

There was a hansom carriage waiting before the house. When he climbed the front steps and reached for the knocker, the door opened beneath his hand. Nicholas stepped back and was nearly trodden underfoot by a young man in his early twenties, black bag in tow. He has a pinched, sour face and a disposition to match, letting loose an oath when he perceived Nicholas was in his way.

And then, just as suddenly, he stopped in mid-word. He stared at Nicholas, the blood draining from his cheeks and a look of pure terror in his eyes. Tipping his hat deferentially, he raced to the cab that awaited below, shot one more terrified glance over his shoulder, then bolted into the carriage, calling to the coachman not to spare the horses.

Bemused, Nicholas stared as the carriage disappeared quickly into the fog, then found Bathory awaiting him at the door. He removed his hat and gloves, handing them to the servant, and his coat as well, discarding his outer garments as he stalked into the main hallway. There was hope in his heart that Farrell has come to his senses and had forgiven him, that he would not be forced to leave London or the company of his new-found friends.

Bathory's ever-disinterested visage gave him no sign for either hope or despair, nor did he accompany Nicholas upstairs. He merely gestured toward the staircase and intoned, "Lord Farrell asks that you join him in the drawing room, sir."

It was a breach of etiquette, but Nicholas paid it no mind. He headed up the stairs at a run, still cherishing even the faintest hope that he wouldn't have to leave for France. Only upon opening the door and entering the room, did he realize that he might be walking into a trap.

Ashley Farrell was standing by the fireplace as he had the night before, but this time he looked far more distressed than drunk. His eyes were sunken and hollow, as if he'd had no rest since they'd last left one another. He was pouring a glass of sherry from the decanter when he heard the door. Spinning, he saw Nicholas and hurled the heavy crystal decanter across the room at him, shouting, "Damn you!"

Nicholas moved to avoid the missile; the decanter had little force by the time it struck the closed door and it broke, rather than shattered. The heavy-sweet scent of sherry wafted up from among the shards of crystal, but Nicholas ignored it. He walked toward Farrell, seeing no forgiveness in his former friend's features, no reprieve from his dilemma.

Still breathing heavily from the effort of having thrown a half-filled decanter of sherry across the room, Farrell glared at him with half-crazed eyes. "Damn you," he repeated coldly. "I trusted you. I trusted that somewhere inside you

were still a man, that you had the dignity of a man. But you have no honor. You're a beast, that's what you are . . . a murdering, filthy beast!"

Knowing that he'd not killed the night before or since he'd left Farrell, Nicholas straightened with righteous indignation. "Is this what you've called me here for?" he asked angrily. "To abuse me? Or to prove to yourself that I would honor our agreement? Well, I have. I've passage on the night Thames ferry and I'll be crossing the channel tomorrow. Three days, you promised me. I'll be gone from London by midnight tonight."

Farrell shook his head in disbelief. "You couldn't leave her alone, could you? Damn you, I'll see you burn in sunlight before I let you take her with you and make her a foul thing like yourself. I'll see her *dead* first."

A single thread of fear struck him as he remembered the man with the bag at the door—a doctor . . . and a familiar one, he'd seen the man somewhere before, perhaps with a friend at a dinner or ball. "Miss Farrell?" he asked. "Has something happened to Lorinda?"

"Has something happened?" Farrell laughed bitterly, almost hysterically. "Damn, but you're cool, Chevalier. You attack my sister in her own home and yet you act—"

His suspicions verified, Nicholas ran to Farrell. Taking him by the forearms, he gave him a single, firm shake. "Listen to me—if anything's happened to Lorinda, I had nothing to do with it. Do you understand? It wasn't *me*." As he stared into Farrell's sherry-soaked visage, he gave him another shake to emphasize the point. "Damn it, man, you know I'd do anything to keep from hurting her! Whatever happened, I didn't do it. It wasn't me."

Using perhaps a bit more force than he should, he flung Farrell onto the ottoman and stalked to the fireplace, wishing that the sherry decanter hadn't been broken. Alcohol had its uses. It was tolerable when cut with fresh human blood, but even in its original, vile-tasting state it could help take the edge off. At the moment he was denied either opportunity for solace, so stared down at the flames in the fireplace instead.

The news of Lorinda's death had stunned him. That Farrell had thought him capable of such an act was a cutting blow. And then there was the fact that LaCroix had promised not to kill either of them.

He'd *promised*.

Nicholas had learned the hard way not to place too much trust in LaCroix's oaths or promises—there was always some minutiae he forgot to specify, some loophole which LaCroix would exploit . . . if he didn't simply decide to go back and his word and do as he pleased simply because he pleased to do so. This time, he thought it might be different. This time . . .

Century after century, things never changed.

There was a sound behind him; Farrell stumbling to his feet.

Nicholas didn't bother turning. Whether Farrell had a stake in one hand and a scythe in the other or happened to be followed by a mob of angry villagers



with flaming torches, all bent on his destruction, it no longer mattered.

And then, Farrell spoke.

"You . . . had nothing to do with this?"

"Nothing," hissed Nicholas. "I would never hurt her."

There was silence, then he felt Farrell's hand on his shoulder. "I . . . believe you."

Turning his head, he saw no accusation in his friend's face—just the sorrow. Clasp ing his hand on Farrell's shoulder, he drew the man closer to him for a moment, then released him. "It was . . . someone else," explained Nicholas. "Someone else like myself. When you threatened to expose me, others must have felt threatened. Lorinda's death was a warning for you to keep silent, to forget what you know."

Farrell stared at him. "Lorinda *isn't* dead."

"Not . . . not dead?" He grabbed Farrell's arm, moving him back to the ottoman and forced him to sit. "*Not* dead?" Nicholas asked again, afraid that his hearing had deceived him.

"She was attacked . . . not killed," explained Farrell. He took a long breath, then met Nicholas' eyes again. "The doctor I called was a fool—he has pretensions at being a poet and I hope he's a better poet than he is a doctor or else he's bound to starve. He told me that Lorinda was suffering from loss of blood. He knew more, I think, but he wouldn't tell me."

"Yes, I saw him when I arrived." Lifting his head, Nicholas focused his attention on the ceiling and listened intently to the sounds of the floor above. There was a heartbeat—thin, but regular. Lorinda *was* alive. "A warning, then," he whispered, almost to himself. "A warning to silence you."

Farrell touched Nicholas' arm. "I swear to you, Chevalier, if she's recovers, I'll keep your secret as long as there is breath in my body—it goes with me to my grave. But if she dies, I'll shout your true nature in parliament, on street corners, in taverns, or where any soul of a man may hear me. I'll not rest until you and your foul friends are driven from the earth!"

It was a long, fervent speech and it took a lot out of Farrell. Nicholas half-smiled, supporting his friend as he fell forward, nearly toppling from the ottoman in a faint. "Easy, Farrell. She'll live. If I and the others with me leave London tonight, she'll live and be well again."

Farrell roused himself at the comment. "Can you be sure?" Catching Nicholas' arm, he pulled himself to his feet. "You must see her for yourself. Perhaps you can calm her. She's been asking for you. I told her that you'd been called away, as we agreed—"

"I'll tell her my departure was delayed and that you sent for me when she fell ill." As Farrell sank back to the couch, Nicholas asked, "Shall I have Bathory escort me? Or shall I assit you up the stairs?"

Farrell waved a hand at him. "Go," he ordered, his voice faint and still breathless. "I'll be up to join you presently. If there is one man in the world

whom I trust with my sister's care, it's you, Chevalier."

Touched, Nicholas placed a hand on Farrell's shoulder. Then he walked to the hall door, and to the staircase that led to Lorinda's private chambers. It was a night for miracles, as far as he was concerned. Not only had he regained Ashley Farrell's friendship and trust, but LaCroix hadn't broken his promise after all.

Nick waited in the hallway until Grace had left the coroner's lab, then slipped into the room unseen. Natalie glanced up at the sound of his entrance, then glanced wearily down at the folder in which she was writing.

Pointing a thumb toward the freezer, he asked, "St. Valentine *still* dead?"

Natalie looked up and met his eyes, a suspicious look on her face. "He's supposed to be, isn't he?"

She was half-way out of her chair when Nick joined her at the desk and put a hand on her shoulder. "That was a joke."

"Oh. Funny. Ha." Sinking back into her chair, she smiled wearily at him. "I'm sorry, my sense of humor checked out at eleven. Weren't you supposed to be here a couple of hours ago?"

"I got a call on the way over—burglary with a possible homicide. Somebody confused 'dead' with 'dead drunk.'"

Natalie chuckled beneath her breath, then turned her attention to the folders on her desk. Lifting one from the stack, she handed it to him. "All there in black and white."

"All?" asked Nick.

She shrugged and stared at the folders on her desk again. "I sort of left out the gray bits. Like the fact that he would have had to have been traveling fifty-five to sixty miles an hour to have decapitated himself . . . and that hallway's only about twenty feet long." Pausing, she looked up at him. "Funny thing is, his blood chemistry looked fine. As far as I could tell, he looked like a perfectly ordinary, mortal male . . . well, excepting the fact that he spine was severed as a result of decapitation."

"Is that important?"

"Could be. Then again, who knows? In the past, all I've had to look at was a pile of ashes. Which—if I'm reading the report right—this guy's gonna be by tomorrow, if I release the body to the mortuary. He left a request to be cremated."

"Yeah, I noticed that in the will." Nick walked over to the freezer, staring at the small metal doors. Ashley Farrell, or what was left of him, was lying on one of those slabs.

"*Should* I release the body?" asked Natalie.

Half-grinning, Nick glanced over at her. "Are you asking the detective or the vampire?"

"Both."



"Well then . . . ." Returning to the desk, he leaned his palms flat on the desktop and stared down at his hands. "As far as the detective is concerned, if you think you've gotten everything you can from the body, release it. And as far as the vampire is concerned—" He hesitated, looking again at the shiny steel metal freezer. "Let him rest in peace."

"Was it a suicide?"

"It was murder." Pulling up a chair, Nick quickly recounted what he'd found in the will and what had struck a chord in his memory during Payton's interview. He may have imagined it, but Natalie seemed to grow a bit tight-lipped when he talked about understanding the necessity of 'moving on,' and the very barest of details about how that was accomplished. He finished off with his encounter with Payton outside the police station and their appointment for the following evening.

"You can't go," declared Natalie emphatically. "Not only do you *not* have the evidence you claimed to have, but if Payton knows you're a vampire and he knew how to kill St. Valentine, he'll know how to kill you, too. You could be walking into an ambush."

"I'll avoid anything that looks like a razor-sharp wire," promised Nick, adding, "Ow!" when Natalie smacked his arm, hard.

"Don't be a smart-ass!" Her expression became more concerned and her finger rested on his arm. "Nick, he knows how to hurt you. Maybe kill you."

"I can't let him get away with murder—I owe that much to Farrell. If Payton lives, he'll spend the rest of his life blackmailing me. I've seen his rap sheet. If he racked up that kind of history on the streets, imagine what he could do with two million dollars in his pocket."

Natalie's eyes narrowed and her hand fell away. "You're not going to kill him."

The fact that it was more of a statement than a question raised his spirits slightly. "No," he agreed, "I'm *not*. But if I don't take care of this, someone else will."

"Janette?"

"Someone," he answered, knowing it was evasive, but it was the best he could do at the moment.

"Then what can you do?" asked Natalie anxiously. "Run? If you do, there's a chance he'll expose you anyway."

Clasping his hands together, Nick leaned forward in the chair and stared across the lab. There had to be *something* he could do. There was still a chance Payton could be mesmerized into forgetting what he knew, under the right circumstances. But he couldn't forget everything—not that he'd murdered St. Valentine. What he needed was a confession that didn't include the word 'vampire.'

Nick pointed across the lab at some of the case specimens on a trolley. "Think you can mock-up an evidence bag for me? Something that looks sealed

and official?"

"Sure. That's no problem." Natalie glanced at him, suspicion and unease evident in her tone and gaze. "What are you planning?"

"I'm not sure, yet. But I think I'm going to need some sunblock, some scotch tape, and Schanke . . . ."



# Chapter Four



There were still remnants of crime scene tape on the walkway to the door of 115 Leslie Street, but that's all they were . . . remnants. It looked as if someone had tried to rip the tape apart then, failing that, had cut it into pieces with shears. The small yellow specs fluttered here and there across the brief and well-manicured lawn.

Nick wondered how long it might stay that way, once Payton took permanent possession of the house. He didn't seem the type who'd be interested in a well-kept lawn.

The curtains were drawn throughout the house; there was little sign of light from inside. He stopped at the door, paused for a moment to make certain that there were no observers, then knocked.

The door was wood, thick and heavy from the dull echo. It wasn't entirely pulled to, and gave beneath his hand, opening slightly. From somewhere within, he heard Payton call, "Come on in, detective."

Remembering Natalie's warning about a possible ambush and wanting to keep his head about him, Nick peered down the length of the dim hallway. The lights were out and it was illuminated only by the lamps in the room at the far end of the hall.

Was this what Ashley Farrell had seen the night he had died?

The carpet had been taken up, leaving a few stains on the hardwood floors that his night-vision had no trouble discerning. He wondered again how Ashley could have missed seeing the wire? True, it was thin, almost impossible to discern from any distance even with the enhanced vision that was part of their vampire nature, but if he'd been thinking, if he'd been careful, he would have seen something like that before it became a danger.

As Nick made his way along the hallway, he thought of how such a thing might happen in his own life. If he lived in such a place and someone he trusted with his secret, like Natalie, had set such a trap for him . . . it would be too easy to run headlong into danger in a place he would have felt at home.

There was a lesson for his kind in that. Unfortunately, Ashley Farrell had learned that lesson far too late.

Payton was lying on a couch in the room where they'd found Farrell's head—he was drinking from a wine bottle and a pizza box was lying open on a coffee table beside him. Seeing Nick, he swung upright and set down the bottle. He shoved the box with his hand and asked, "Want some?" When Nick didn't answer, he laughed, the sound more like a cackle. "No, I guess not."

The pizza was heavily laden with garlic. Nick did his best to ignore the



smell. He mustn't show any sign of weakness—his plan would be doomed from the start if he did. Instead, he stood there, staring down at Payton. "Eating like that all the time could kill you," he noted.

Payton glanced down at the pizza. "I guess too much of anything can kill you. Except money."

"That's what it was all about, wasn't it?" asked Nick. "You and St. Valentine?"

As soon as he spoke the words, he was certain he'd made a mistake. Too soon, he'd pressed the point too soon.

But Payton merely waved his hand, as if dismissing the barb. "Ash liked pretty things." Picking up a piece of pizza, Payton used it to gesture toward a Chippendale chair against the wall. "You know how much that chair cost? You know how much this *table* cost? The money didn't mean anything to him. He saw something he liked, he bought it."

Nick watched a thin stream of oil run off the crust of the pizza and fall onto the wooden top of the table. "Like you."

"Like me." Payton bit off a piece of pizza and chewed on it thoughtfully. "At first, I figured—what the hell? He's got money. So long as he wasn't into anything too kinky, I could deal. But he didn't want that. He just liked having me around. I guess he liked having somebody to talk to."

Wandering over to the Chippendale, Nick ran his hand along the back of the chair. Even as a mortal, Farrell had an eye for fine furniture. From the looks of the place, it had become one of his few remaining passions. Turning, he asked, "So, there was nothing between you and Ashley St. Valentine?"

"Nope." Dropping the crust in the pizza box, Payton wiped his hand on the leg of his jeans and added, "That was okay by me—he wasn't my type, anyway. You got a type, detective? A negative, maybe?"

He couldn't react, couldn't let Payton slip him up. Nick merely nodded, as if conceding a point, then sat down in the chair. "When did you threaten to leave Ashley?"

Payton started, then sat up straight. "How'd you—?"

"That was the reason he put you in his will, wasn't it?" Nick leaned forward, clasping his hands together. "It's the only thing that makes sense. Maybe you were getting bored. Maybe he wouldn't buy you something you wanted—"

"It was a Lamborghini," answered Payton. Pouting, he leaned back against the couch, then languidly reached out and picked up another piece of pizza. "Told me I'd get bombed some night and have a smash up. He didn't want to risk it."

"But you stayed around for the money."

"Of course I hung around for the cash. I'm not *stupid*." The pizza was leaving a trail of oil on the crushed velvet cushions of the couch. "With him talking about 'moving on' all the time, especially after we had a fight, I figured I wouldn't have to wait long for the money. He'd go kack himself and I'd be loaded. He even showed me the note he was gonna leave."

He gestured with the piece of pizza and Nick was hard-pressed not to leap up and pull Payton from the couch. He had no idea how Farrell had put up with Payton, considering how fond Farrell had been of furniture.

"But then," added Payton, through a mouthful of sauce and cheese, "he didn't do anything about it. He started hiding things away and making phone calls—if I walked in while he was on the phone, he hung up. I'd been ditched before, I knew the signs." Payton nodded knowingly. "Guess it's like that for you people. Gotta move on before somebody figures out what's what, huh?"

Nick shrugged. "But you still would have gotten the money if St. Valentine had left or disappeared."

"Yeah . . . a year from now. A whole year?" Payton's disgusted expression made it obvious that he considered the short span an eternity. "What was I supposed to do until then? Oh, sure, he was gonna leave some money for me to live on—practically nothing. I've got a standing to maintain. I've got bills to pay. Lots of bills. I go to the best clubs, wear the best clothes. The money wouldn't have lasted two months." Payton's eyes narrowed. "Ash didn't want to live anymore, not really. I just helped him along a little bit."

Nick stared down at the floor. "So, it wasn't a suicide?"

"Suicide? Hell, Ash never would have had the guts to kill himself." When Nick looked up, he saw Payton grinning as if he were proud of himself. "He left it up to me. I think that's why he kept me around. He knew I'd do it even if he wouldn't. So we had a big scene and I walked out on him; even threatened not to come back. Came back after he went out and put up the wire. When he came back, I was waiting for him in the den. Told him I forgave him and everything was all patched up. He came right for me. Then—" Payton made a motion with a pizza across his own neck, then shrugged. His eyes were cold and hard as he added, "Yeah, I killed him. And you can't do a damn thing about it, can you?"

Sitting there, staring across the room at Ashley Farrell's murderer, Nick felt a roar begin to rise within his chest. He *could* do something about it. He could give into the beast within himself and tear Todd Payton into little, tiny pieces. He could rip the shirt away from that too-pampered skin, sink his teeth into the flesh of the neck, and drain every drop of Payton's blood. He could take revenge for Farrell's murder.

But it *would* be revenge, not justice.

And Ashley Farrell deserved justice.

Nicholas hesitated at the door, one hand raised to knock, but not quite touching the wood. If Lorinda Farrell was sleeping, he didn't want to disturb her. Farrell had only asked that he look in on Lorinda. If she'd lost that much blood, rest would be the best thing for her.

He slipped into the darkened room quietly, pausing for a moment to get his

bearings. To have mistaken it for anything other than a young lady's bedchamber would have been impossible; the curtains and fittings were edged in lace, the dressing table held all manner of small bottles of cosmetics and perfume, and even such a large and impressive piece of furniture as her wardrobe had a delicate look to it.

Nicholas walked over to her dressing table and, on impulse, lifted a bottle and removed the stopper. Essence of roses was one of Lorinda's favorite scents. Smiling, he returned the bottle to the table. It brought to mind happier evenings when they'd danced at balls or galas, chatted in salons, or even played Speculation or whist until only the dawn and the small yawns that Lorinda tried to hide from her ever-protective brother that led Nicholas to finally leave off the game and return to his quarters.

There was a movement from the canopied bed. Nicholas walked over to it slowly. He stared at her for a moment through the filmy silk of the draperies that hung all about the bed, then pushed them back with his hand for a better idea of her condition.

The blankets were askew and Lorinda was settled amongst them, her skin almost as white as the background of the rose patterned covering. Her hair had been unbound for sleep; he'd only ever seen it up for formal dances, or in tight ringlets. It complimented her, gave truth to the innocence of her soul, finally reflected in her features. He'd scolded Farrell that he'd protected his orphaned sister too much, so shielded her from the world that he'd denied her the opportunity to build the resistance she would need to survive in such the modern world.

Now, he could not but think that Farrell had chosen the wisest course. Lorinda was clever and learned, but there was still a simple sweetness about her that charmed him. When she'd seen the headline in the evening paper about the drowning deaths that had resulted from a boat over-turning in the Thames, she'd actually shed tears for the poor souls. When Nicholas had laughed, she'd turned away, her cheeks blazing in anger and embarrassment. It was he who'd felt foolish then and when he'd begged her pardon for such callous behavior, he'd meant every word with all his heart.

She had her petty moments, too . . . expected of a girl who'd been raised with the care of a hothouse flower. But, overall, she was delightful company. She'd be a fine wife someday and a better mother. He envied the man who might be lucky enough to win her heart and share her future.

Considering these things, Nicholas brushed her cheek with his fingers, only then noticing the bandage that was wrapped around her neck. He turned her head and, trying not to wake her, worked the wrapping free.

The wounds were all too familiar—the bite of a vampire.

He swallowed, staring down at the ugly red marks in her pale flesh, anger warring with sorrow in his chest. It was his presence that had led to this, his friendship. Farrell and his sister would never have fallen afoul of LaCroix, if not



for him.

But . . . they were free now. This was only a warning. Once Nicholas left for the continent Farrell would keep his word, he was sure of that. There'd be no danger to LaCroix or any others of their kind from the Farrells.

Having convinced himself that Lorinda would be well—and now knowing that he could assure Farrell of the same—Nicholas touched her cheek once more with his fingers. She stirred at that and her eyes opened, blurry with sleep.

He felt like a startled fox, awakened from its den, not knowing whether to flee or stay. Lorinda seemed to make the choice for him, her hand raising up and catching his. The fingers curled around his own, warm flesh against cooler skin. And she sighed, still sleepy.

"Sir Chevalier," she whispered, "I have had such an odd dream. Am I dreaming still?"

"Perhaps," answered Nicholas, smiling down upon her and matching her tone. "What did you dream?"

Her eyelashes fluttered for a moment, then she closed her eyes and smiled, her head burrowing into the pillow. "There was a man who came to see me. It wasn't proper—we've not been introduced. I awoke and then he was in my room, at the window." He eyelids opened again and she stared up at Nicholas. "It seemed so real. Was he here?"

"Go on. What did he look like, this dream man?"

"He was tall—ever so tall. And his skin was like snow. His hair was close-cropped and looked like wheat when it's been cut, shining gold or white however the light may fall upon it. I was afraid. But he said—" She stirred herself slightly, lifting her head from the pillow and staring out through her draperies, as if the man were present. "He told me not to be afraid, that he'd not come to hurt me. He said he'd come on your behalf. Oh, did he, Sir Chevalier?"

Nicholas pressed her fingers to his lips. "In the dream, perhaps he did," he answered her. "What else?"

"That he'd come to tell me a story. About you." She met his eyes, smiling sweetly. "He told me that you walk the night because you must fear the sun. That you had forsaken God and the life of a man to live forever, in the night. Is it true?"

Clearing his throat, Nicholas forced himself to release her hand—he could feel the pulse of her wrist against his lips and there was the smell of blood from her wound. "What else?" he asked sharply, wanting to cry. "What else did he tell you?"

"He said that I could live forever, too. That if you loved me, you could make me like you, that we could live in the night, forever." Lorinda caressed her own neck, brushing away the bandage from the wound. Her brow furrowed, as if she were concentrating. "He kissed my neck. There was a . . . a great pain. And then it was like—" She hesitated and met his eyes again. "It was like love."

Her eyes were wide, staring into his. Her lips were warm and searching. Before he knew what he was doing, Nicholas found himself bending toward her, cupping her chin with his hand, lips almost meeting . . . but he took control of himself in time and pressed his lips against her cheek. "It was a dream," he whispered. "Go back to sleep. It will be morning soon."

"But can't it be like that?" she asked him as he pulled away. Her hand reached out and grasped the edge of his frock coat, holding him there. "Can't we live together, forever, like the man said? Can you not love me?"

"I *do* love you," said Nicholas. He caressed her cheek, trying to ignore the blood beneath the skin, the faint echo of her thready heartbeat, which was growing faster in excitement. Catching her chin with the tips of his fingers, he looked down at her intently, his smile grim. "I love you as my sister's friend, Lorinda, as my own sister. I will do everything I can to protect you. You can't live the life I lead. You have to live in the sunshine. You'll love and have children . . . I can't be a part of that."

There were tears in her eyes. "Then, it *was* all a dream, wasn't it?" she asked. Biting her lip, she slid down under the covers. "I'm being silly, Sir Chevalier. You must forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive," said Nicholas. Bending forward, he pressed a kiss on her forehead. "You've been ill—you need your rest. I told your brother I'd look in on you before I left."

"But . . . you will come back, won't you, Sir Chevalier?"

There was no harm in the lie. "I'll come back," he promised, stroking her hand with his own. "Now, go to sleep."

There was a muffled thump from somewhere below and a cry. Nicholas straightened, listening intently. When no other sound followed, he ran to the door, threw it open, and headed down the stairs as fast as he could, not hearing Lorinda's call from behind him.

The door to the drawing room was open. As he stepped into the room, he was blinded momentarily by the blaze of the fire. There was a movement to his right—through the door behind him and into the hall—

"Nicholas—?"

The sound of LaCroix's voice drew his attention back to the room. Farrell was lying on the ottoman, his skin even paler than that of his sister. His eyes were closed in . . . in death?"

"He's at the brink," explained LaCroix. Shrugging off his coat, he draped it over the back of the Sheraton chair, pausing a moment to trace the lyre carved into the back and note, "*Excellent work.*"

"What have you done?" demanded Nicholas. He stalked over to LaCroix, anger rising within his chest like an avenging fury. "You swore that you wouldn't kill him. Or his sister!"

"And I haven't. I've merely given him . . . and her . . . an opportunity." LaCroix's smile was slow and sleek, like a serpent. "Oh, Nicholas, you can't

think I could have left him mortal *and* knowing our secret? Something had to be done with the one or the other of them. Although his sister was a more palatable morsel, I think *he* has more promise. Now that he's one of us, he has a reason to protect us."

Staring down at Ashley Farrell's features, Nicholas felt a knot rise in his stomach. Some part of him wished that Farrell might prove too frail, that the transformation would not take and he might die. And yet another part of him could not bear that thought—that he'd cost his friend his life. In this way, in this one way, Farrell might live . . .

LaCroix placed his hand on Farrell's shoulder, then tilted his fingers so that they rested along the flesh of his neck. "Yes," he noted, seemingly pleased with himself. "I think we might call this a success. One action to make it certain, of course."

Nicholas flinched beneath LaCroix's hard stare and turned away, his back to both of them. "No. I can't do that. Don't ask me."

"Very well." LaCroix walked past him. Smiling, he rolled up his left sleeve.

Turning away again, Nicholas found himself facing the hall . . . and froze. Janette stood there, still wearing her cape. She had her arm around Lorinda Farrell and was leading her into the room.

Lorinda walked like one who was still sleeping, her nightgown billowing around her. Although her eyes were open, they stared straight ahead, unseeing.

"No," said Nicholas again, taking a step toward them.

Janette held up her hand angrily. "She's well, Nichola—only sleeping. No harm will come to her. She was trying to follow you down the stairs. She would have broken her pretty little neck if I hadn't caught her. Come here, girl."

Leading Lorinda to another chair, Janette seated the girl, then placed herself behind as if guarding her.

Nicholas didn't know where to go or to look, or turn. The scent of blood drew him and his found his eyes drawn to LaCroix, who had raked a nail down his forearm to his wrist. Farrell stirred at the scent, his head moving from side to side, as if he were about to awaken. Nicholas saw LaCroix raise Farrell's head from the ottoman with far more care than he would have thought possible.

Ashley Farrell's eyes shot open, true gold. Nicholas stepped back in shock at the unwelcome sight. Like a mindless beast, Farrell grabbed for LaCroix's wrist and began to drink, his lips smacking against the flesh of LaCroix's wrist.

LaCroix gave only the minutest sign of pain, then gazed down fondly at Farrell, who was feeding from his wrist like a wild animal. He placed his right hand in Farrell's hair, mussing it fondly. "Just like Nicholas," he said. "Do you remember, Janette?"

"I remember." When Nicholas turned to look at her, she was watching him, eyes guarded, as if she, too, was not entirely pleased with this development. "I remember it well."

The drinking continued for some moments—to Nicholas it seemed an



eternity. Finally, LaCroix wrenched his wrist from Farrell. Growling, Farrell snatched at the hand as if to retrieve his prize, but LaCroix cuffed him, just hard enough to knock him back to the ottoman. Seemingly sated, Farrell closed his eyes, let out a shuddering breath, and then seemed to sink into a deep sleep.

"Yes," said LaCroix, leaning over his new fledgling. "Sleep. You'll have a busy night ahead of you tomorrow. Well done." Then he straightened and looked at Nicholas. "You'd better be on your way—your ship leaves in an hour's time."

Stunned, Nicholas stared at LaCroix in amazement. "What? But . . . I can't go now. There's no reason—"

"I say you should go. That's reason enough." LaCroix walked over to the chair where Lorinda sat, still oblivious to the world around her. "The girl can't stay here, not with her brother newly brought across. Janette will take her back to our quarters and keep her there. She's been ill, after all, as has been her brother. If any inquire, he's sent her there for better care and so she won't fall victim to the same malady that's taken him. He'll send for her, in time. What he chooses to do with her after that is none of our affair." Turning on his heel, he fixed Nicholas with an angry gaze, "Nor it is any concern of yours. It's your fault this happened—you put them in this situation."

Nicholas glanced over his shoulder at Ashley Farrell, who was still lying on the ottoman, a trickle of blood running down the side of his face. He turned to look at Lorinda, not daring to wonder what would become of her now.

"Come," said LaCroix, taking his arm. "We'll meet you in Paris in a month's time. Perhaps Lord Farrell will consent to join us. There's much for him to learn . . . he'll be entitled to a holiday."

Pausing at the chair in which Lorinda sat, he met Janette's eyes. "You'll take care of her?"

If Janette had been jealous of his attentions to Lorinda before, there was no sign of it now. She rested her hand on the girl's shoulder protectively. "No harm will come to her, Nichola."

He believed her, trusted her . . . but he'd also trusted LaCroix. "Make certain of it," he said, more sharply than he'd intended.

LaCroix accompanied him down the front staircase and to the door; there was no sign of Bathory or any of the other servants. Forgoing his hat and coat, Nicholas paused in the doorway when LaCroix dropped a hand on his shoulder. "In Paris, in a month's time," repeated LaCroix. Then, before Nicholas could escape, he added, "I *did* keep my promise to you."

The door closed behind him and Nicholas hurried down the steps and out to the street. Yes, he'd be on that ship tonight, but in a month's time, he'd be far from Paris.

After all, he'd not given his word to LaCroix.

Killing Payton would not avenge Ashley Farrell's death. Nicholas fought to control the beast within him . . . and won. He withdrew the falsified evidence bag and placed on the table beside the pizza box.

Payton started, then picked up the bag. "That's it?"

"That's all they'd need to convict you."

"That . . . and a confession," said Payton cheerfully. "Which they're not about to get."

Nick rose to his feet and stepped to one side of the door as Schanke and two uniformed policemen entered.

"I wouldn't be so sure," said Schanke happily, holding up a small cassette recorder. "Thanks to the miracles of modern technology, we have your entire confession on tape. Todd Payton, I'm arresting you for the murder of Ashley St. Valentine."

Both of the policemen moved toward Payton, who leaped over the table. The pizza box hit the floor and the lid closed. Payton's sneaker landed on the lid and he slid into Nick, grappling with him. They crashed into the Chippendale chair, their combined weights slamming it into the wall and breaking it.

For an instant, they stared at one another, the sound startling both of them. "You bastard!" screamed Payton. "I'll tell everybody! I'll tell the world *exactly* what you are! In fact, I'll *show* them."

Nick wasn't certain where the cross came from—whether it had been around Payton's neck or in his pants pocket the whole time. He remembered to grab the cross with his right hand as Payton shoved it toward him, then kicked Payton's legs out from under him. They went down to the floor in a tangle of limbs. He slipped his left hand into his pants pocket as they struggled. The pad in his hand was placed over Payton's mouth and nose and held there as Nick feigned a life and death struggle.

An instant later it was over; Payton was lifted from him, unconscious.

"Nick, you okay?" asked Schanke anxiously, squatting down beside him partner as the other officers lowered Payton to the floor beside him. "Just stay there a minute."

He blinked, shook his head, then nodded groggily. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." Nick sat up slowly and gestured toward Payton. "Maybe you'd better call an ambulance—I heard his head hit the floor. He might have a concussion."

"Copy that, will ya?" Schanke gestured toward one of the officers, who was already pulling his radio from his belt and calling in. Picking up what remained of the Chippendale chair, Schanke grimaced. "Was this worth money?"

"I think so," said Nick. He looked around the room—one of the arresting officers had left and the other was in the hall. He only had a few minutes. If Natalie didn't show up soon . . .

"Hi, guys." Natalie paused in the doorway of the room. Frowning at seeing Nick on the floor, she hurried over to him. "What happened to you?"

"He took down our friend there."

"Mid-air—mid-air collision." Nick took a deep breath, then several shallow breaths. "I can't—I can't breathe—"

"Lie down, damn it." Natalie pulled the flaps of his jacket aside, then the edges of his shirt followed, the buttons flying as she pulled them apart. She felt along his chest, "No broken ribs. I think you just had the wind knocked out of you. Just lie still." Turning to Schanke, she said, "There's gotta be a bathroom upstairs. Wet down a washcloth with cold, *really* cold, water. And bring down a couple of towels, too."

Schanke, who'd been pushed to one side during Natalie's 'angel of mercy' routine, struggled to his feet. "Is he gonna be—?"

"He's going to be *fine*." She snapped her fingers in his direction and ordered, "Go, go, go!"

"I'm gone," called Schanke, hurrying from the room.

Natalie followed him to the door, surreptitiously flicked the lock, then closed the door so that the lock caught. Nick was already on his feet, pausing only to kick the pizza box out of the way before moving toward the window.

"Where's the chloroform patch?" asked Natalie, going to Payton, who was still out cold on the floor.

"In Schanke's pocket."

"Cute. Let's hope he doesn't notice it until you get it back *out* of his pocket." She paused long enough to sniff the air lightly, adding, "I don't smell a thing, either. You know, if Schanke figures out you chloroformed Payton, we're sunk."

Nick flipped open the lock on the window, silently praying the he wasn't tripping a burglar alarm of some sort. Janette was waiting outside. He gave her a hand through the window and she slid down from the sill. She was wearing black slacks, a black sweater, and a black knit cap on her head.

She tugged down the black sweater, explaining, "I thought as long as I was breaking and entering, I might as well *look* the part."

"There was no 'breaking' involved," explained Nick, catching her arm and directly her to where Natalie was reviving Payton with smelling salts. "Just entering."

Janette stood behind Natalie and made a small sound of annoyance.

Natalie scooted to one side. "Just tell me to move, okay? There's no need to—"

"Hey, hey, we're all on the same side, here," said Nick, kneeling down on the other side of Payton. "And we're running out of time—"

Payton gasped and stirred, his eyes flickering open. Janette pushed Natalie aside, leaned over Payton, and stared into his eyes. Then she paused and looked up at Nick. "What is his name?"

"Todd Payton," hissed Nick.

"Ah." Positioning herself over Payton again, Janette stared into his eyes. "Todd Payton, listen to me? Can you hear me, Todd?"

There was a momentary pause, then Payton responded almost sleepily, "I



hear—”

“Good.” Janette grinned at Nick, then turned her attention back to Payton. “You do not believe in vampires, Todd Payton. You have never believed that vampires exist. You believe that if you say they exist, people will laugh at you. You do not like them to laugh at you, Todd.”

“Not laugh—” he echoed.

“You killed Ashley—”

“St. Valentine—” said Nick quickly, before Janette could give the wrong name.

She started at that, then nodded her thanks and added, “You killed Ashley St. Valentine. You wanted his money. That is what you will tell the police. You tried to blackmail Detective Knight because you thought he was like Ashley. You thought he liked to be around pretty boys. You were wrong. *Trust me,*” added Janette, in a more normal tone, “You were very, *very* wrong.”

Nick glanced over at Natalie. He wasn’t entirely certain whether she was trying not to laugh or was annoyed.

“I was wrong—” said Payton.

“You will not remember that I was here. You had a fight and bumped your head. Now, go to sleep. You will awaken in a few minutes and you will tell the police that you killed Ashley St. Valentine.” Janette touched Payton’s forehead with her fingertips, then drew them down his face in a line, across his nose. By the time she reached his chin, Payton’s eyes were closed and he was sleeping.

Just then, someone rattled the door knob. “Nat? Natalie? The door’s locked. You okay in there?”

Natalie turned to Janette. “Fly, Tinkerbell, fly!”

Before Janette could get an appropriate answer out, Nick had risen from the floor, caught her hand, and dragged her to her feet. “We’re out of time.”

“Nat?” called Schanke again.

Natalie ran to the door. “Everything’s okay. The door must have blown shut or something.” She rattled the door lock. “The lock’s sticking. Hang on—I’m getting it.”

Nick placed a hand on either side of Janette’s waist and helped her onto the windowsill. She swung her legs to the outside of the sill, then grabbed Nick’s shoulder. “You owe me,” she warned him.

His attention still on the door, Nick said absently, “I’ll thank you later.”

“Properly, I hope.” Then, before he could move, Janette had pulled him close and was kissing him.

He held out for about three seconds. Then, just when things got interesting, Janette broke away, gave a little wave, and slipped out the window. Nick stood there for a second, dazed.

“I’m working on it, Schanke,” said Natalie loudly, she hissed quietly, “The window! Nick, the window!”

“What? Oh!” Quickly, Nick lowered the window into place and locked it,

then dropped to the floor where he'd been earlier.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Natalie opened the door and stepped back, allowing Schanke and an officer to enter—they almost fell into the room.

"Lock was stuck," she offered, with a shrug.

"I brought the wet rag," said Schanke, handing her the rag and the towels.

Taking them from him, Natalie returned to Nick. She dropped the wet rag into his forehead from enough of a height that it went 'plop' and dribbled water all over his head and into his eyes. He started to protest, but she folded a towel and raised his head, grabbing just enough hair in the process to give him something else to think about.

"He's fine," she told Schanke. "Just had the wind knocked out of him." Gesturing over her shoulder, she indicated Payton, who was showing signs of stirring—the uniformed officer was standing by him immediately. "He's okay, too, although you should probably take him in to emergency just to make sure he doesn't have a concussion."

"You really going to be all right?" asked Schanke, squatting down beside Nick.

Nick raised himself on his elbows, then moved his hand to catch the washcloth as it tumbled from his forehead. "Fine. Like Nat said—I just had the wind knocked out of me."

"But you're bleeding—" Schanke reached over a finger and wiped a speck of red from the corner of Nick's mouth. He held it up for Nick's inspection, then glanced at Natalie, a smile slowly spreading across his face. "Now, I could be wrong, but this looks like lipstick."

Natalie met Schanke's gaze with an innocent look. "Thought I'd have to do mouth-to-mouth for a minute, there. Just checking to make sure his airway wasn't obstructed."

"Riiiiight." Still grinning, Schanke rose to his feet. "I think the EMTs are here." Turning toward the uniformed officer, he added, "Keep an eye on this door, okay." He met Natalie's eyes when he added, "The lock sticks," just before leaving.

Natalie glared down at Nick. "You're gonna owe me *big* time for this," she whispered.

"Put it on my tab." Taking a deep breath, he lowered himself to the floor. "That was close."

"Too close," agreed Natalie. She glanced over her shoulder at the officer who was keeping a determined eye on Payton. "He really won't remember anything?"

"With luck, no. The D.A. will have his confession to the murder, *and* the fact that he tried to set me up, all on tape."

"Speaking of which—" Natalie leaned forward.

Nick realized too late what she was about to do and was in no position to defend himself when she ripped off the microphone that was taped to his chest.



"Yeouch!"

"Careful," said Natalie softly, "you're attracting attention."

In answer, he took the wet washcloth from his forehead, balled it up and threw it at her. Catching it, Natalie set it to one side, along with the wire he'd been wearing. "How'd the other thing go?" she whispered.

Nick held out his right hand and Natalie held it in her own—there was only a faint burn mark where he'd grabbed the cross and that was already fading.

"Not bad," she commented. "You're doing better with this stuff. Either that, or we've found another use for sunblock." Then she cuffed him lightly in the shoulder. "That's a hell of a chance you took. He could have come at you with what was left of the chair, or a lighter—"

"Or an uzi, or a knife," finished Nick. He nodded. "I know. Believe me, I thought about it . . . a lot. I thought it was worth the risk."

"Yeah, well, *next time*—"

"There won't *be* a next time," promised Nick. "You have my word."

"I'll hold you to that promise."

Somehow, his fingers folded around her own. Natalie looked down at her hand in his. Their eyes met for a moment . . . then she looked away. Withdrawing her hand from his grasp, she said, "I'd better get back. You just let them fuss around you for a while, then tell everybody all you need is a good night's sleep."

"You're the doctor."

"Yes, I am," she said sharply. Now standing, she smiled down at him. "See you tomorrow?"

"Guess so."

Closing his eyes, Nick listened to her steps as she walked away, then braced himself for the next act of this performance as he heard Natalie's footsteps fade into the clatter of the EMTs. He'd been lucky, not only that everything had gone his way, but that he'd been able to talk both Janette and Natalie into such a hare-brained scheme. It had worked, though. His secret was safe, trusted to a very few, very special souls. And there was no question that'd he'd keep his promise to Natalie and do everything in his power to prevent anything like this from ever happening again.

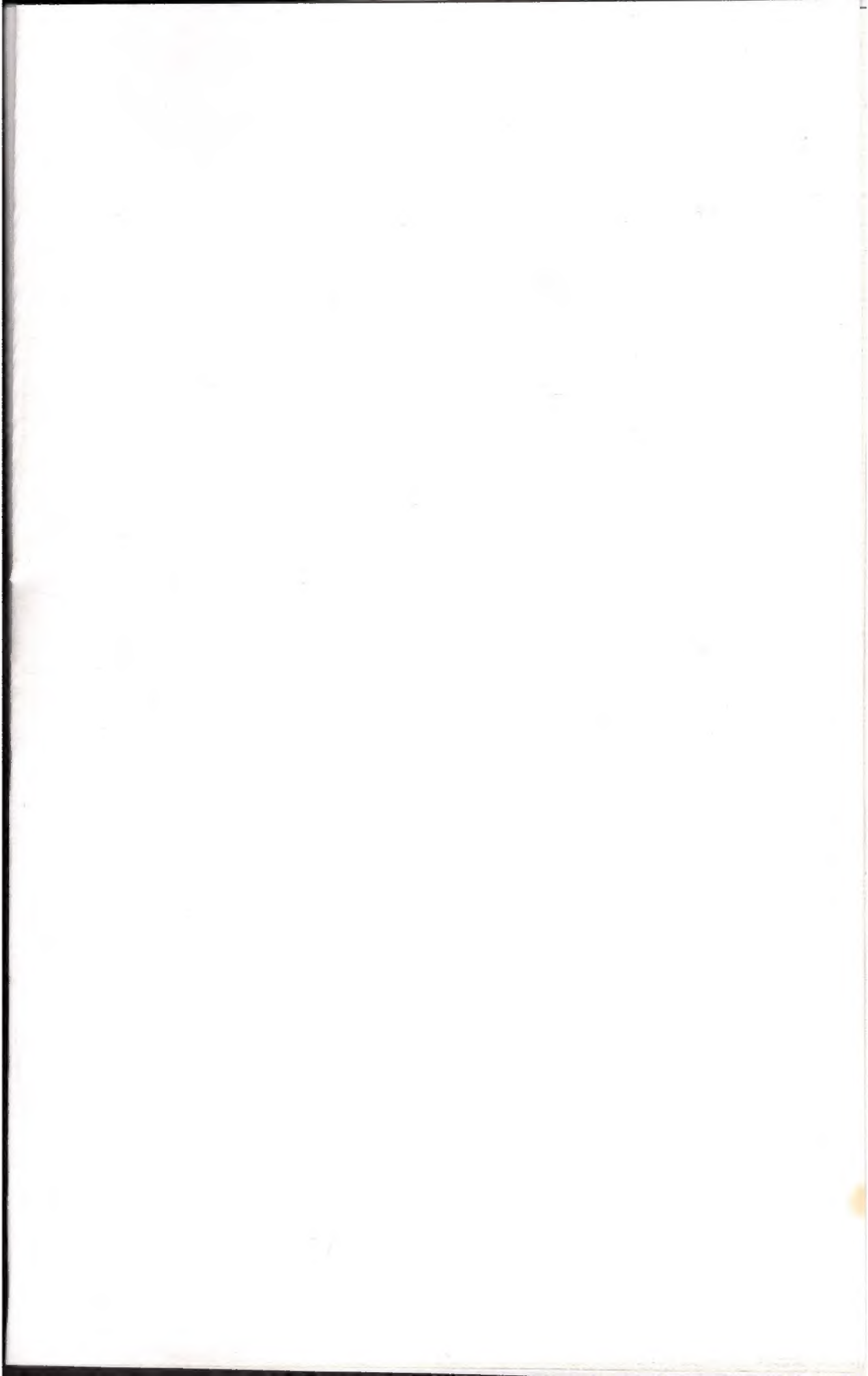
After all, he'd given his word.

## *The End*









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